DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 775 CS 206 456

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TITLE Think PR...Before You Write.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (64th, East Lansing, MI, August 8-11, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Descriptions; Higher Education; Mass Media; *Public Relations; *Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Gatekeeper Role

ABSTRACT

In addition to introducing students to the basic skills of public relations writing, a public relations course should move students toward public relations "thinking" and provide them with tangible evidence to demonstrate their writing talents to a prospective employer. One such course begins with a brainstorming exercise that lends itself ideally to pointing out common hazards in public relations writing. Students are later assigned to interview "gatekeepers" in both the print and the broadcast media in order to demonstrate their lack of control over copy once it leaves their desks. This exercise also acquaints the students with the need to research the intended marketplace before writing. Once the concept of "think first" begins to crystallize, the students start writing basic exercises, including preparing a press release for print, adapting material to different media styles, and preparing news or public service announcements for radio and television. Peer review of copy acquaints students with the difficulties faced by media "gatekeepers." Each student also secures an actual client to work for during the term, which results in a press kit with tangible evidence of quality and variety in at least 14 pieces of public relations writing. (HTH)

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THINK PR ... Before You Write

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CS206456

Presented to the Public Reltions Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Annual Convention, East Lansing, Michigan, August 10, 1981.

THINK PR...Before You Write

It's relatively easy to develop a course which will introduce students to the basic skills of public relations writing, but will such a course lead to a more important objective--public relations thinking?

Leading students through a series of mechanical, workbook assignments may reveal to them how writing tasks in public relations differ from those they learned in Reporting I, but are the string of tasks an end in themselves or should they be accompanied by concepts which serve to integrate and reinforce them into guiding patterns which will carry over into new situations?

Then at the end of the course, what tangible evidence will the public relations student have to demonstrate his or her writing talents to a prospective employer with the same impressiveness as the mass of clippings produced by a journalistic counterpart in advanced newswriting courses?

These two objectives--enhancing public relations thinking and producing an attractive showpiece of writing talent for the student--form the basis of a maturing course content for what was an experimental offering in Writing for Public Relations and which now has become a major course in the required

curriculum.

Simple exercises may be used to drive home concepts valuable to the public relations practitioner. For instance, a brainstorm session is employed as an opener on the first day of class...to choose the name of a public relations agency. Use of the agency environment during the term helps to constant the transfer from the classroom simulations to the "real world" setting. On the opening day brainstorming is used to illustrate three principles:

1) your first idea is generally not your best idea...keep trying.

2) your favorite idea is not likely to be the one most acceptable to others...keep testing.

3) the brainstorming process lends itself ideally to pointing out common hazards in writing--the trite, the cutsey, the inappropriate, the mundane and so on...stay on your guard.

The knockout factors for public relations writing have just begun. Most students make the mistaken assumption that the next step from the typewriter is an open pipeline to the media and through which there is a free exposure of their messages, public service announcements and press releases. In order to make them aware of the uncertainties and lack of control once their copy leaves them, each student is assigned a print and a broadcast gatekeeper to interview.

The role of the gatekeeper in news reporting has been documented for newspapers,[1] television,[2] radio[3] and most recently for public relations[4] in the study of a mass diffusion campaign of health news. The study of Freimuth and Van Nevel reflects what the students also find when their individual gatekeeper

interviews are compiled into booklet form and they read each others stories and compare notes. They find that the gatekeepers not only affect the content of their press releases, but also the news judgments of editors and print writers differ from broadcasters. Furthermore, the criteria may differ even within the same news organization. While they may suffer from the pangs of discovering that their copy will always remain anonymous, the students learn an important public relations concept...that there are untapped channels in addition to the local editor and reporter such as syndicated and wire services, op-ed and specialized correspondents, canned and feature networks.

If uncertainty is on the increase by this time, the student is confirmed, however, by both editors and broadcasters of at least one important "reality."...that what does go into the pipeline is for <u>local</u> consumption. Thus the journalistic news values of timeliness, proximity, prominence and consequence which are learned in Reporting I are translated into public relations thinking...Knowing the readership in the circulation area and the listener/viewership in the broadcast sweep is a must.

This fundamental public relations concept of "localizing" and "personalizing" is one of the most difficult to get across. And the gatekeeper assignment provides what every instructor dreams of...the motivation for the student to research the marketplace...<u>before</u> he writes. Without this perceived need, the library assignment would be just one more dull academic

exercise. In order to research the markets, the student must learn to use the standard reference texts such as the Ayer Directory of Publications, Bacon's Publicity Checker, Broadcasting Yearbook and the Television Factbook.

As these concepts of think first begin to crystallize, the student starts to write the basics. Specific classroom tasks closely parallel those found common to most public relations classes in a 1980 survey.[5] They include: preparing a press release for print, adapting material to different media styles, analyzing the time of releases for maximum benefit, preparing news or public service announcements for radio and television, writing communications objectives, and so on. These assigned exercises accumulate and are put in a "model sampler" for future use when the student wishes to refer back for questions on style and format. It also provides the opportunity for the quality of writing to come under fire.

Writing good copy is the result of talent and experience that can only be refined in a single class. Recognizing good copy written by others is a more easily taught skill. Once a term students are asked to submit their copy to peer review in a manner described in this forum two years ago.[6]

Students are asked to pick the five best stories, ranking them in order, and then to explain why they picked them. They are also asked to choose five stories, this time unranked, which they like least and tell why. The instructor consolidates the comments and presents them to the class, identifying those students with high rankings and discussing those aspects

of stories which brought disfavor without specific reference to a particular student's work. Then, in written summary, the instructor can be more pointed with those students who earned the low rankings from their peers--providing, of course, that such criticisms seem valid.

After evaluating 20 papers in this fashion, students often report this is one of the hardest assignments of the term and that they now see the role of the media gatekeeper as not an easy one to play. Evaluating another's copy, and backing up those evaluations with sound reasoning, is definitely an exercise in public relations thinking as well.

Writing brochure copy is another opportunity to stimulate critical thinking. Students typically think of brochures largely in terms of design, with copy being only a secondary feature. Stress upon the cost and permanence of most brochures lends itself to analysis of certain problems--selecting material which will not readily become outdated, simplifying the complex and invigorating through inspired writing what are otherwise lifeless facts. A favorite assignment in this regard is to get the student to improve upon a 200-word segment of particularly wooden brochure copy. Examples are usually easy to find. The first revision comes easy. From then on, forcing the student to manicure words and sentences further requires some insistence. The end product, after at least three revisions, is a four-step lesson in the value of rewriting. Some students only progress part way in this process, but in each class there are always one or two examples worth reproducing for the whole class to examine.

Writing good copy for the listener/viewer is even more demanding of word economy with imaginative dialogue and sound effects. Half-sheets of 8½ x 11 paper serve as a storyboard. Then the sheets are tacked onto the classroom corkboard to get peer feedback on whether or not the idea takes shape for someone else. This simulation of market testing helps to order the sequence of the idea and to re-order the customary thinking of putting everything "at the top" as in a print lead. Writing for the ear instead of the eye proves to be a problem for students who are likely to have more extensive training in print than in broadcasting.

During the process from the storyboard to the finished script, the students are taken on a field trip to a local television station and shown the use of the film and slide chain and other tricks the camera can play with very simple visuals. Like finished brochure copy mentioned earlier, all students will not gain the knack of good broadcast copy in the short segment allowed in a public relations writing class. Fortunately, the college's three radio and one public television stations select the products of one or two students for actual use on the air.

It is in this interplay between the classroom exercises and the "real" world that the students learn to write...but more importantly...to think beforehand. As these experiences accumulate and the concepts are reinforced, the last and most important assignments come into play.

Early in the term each student in the hypothetical public relations agency secures an actual client. Working with the client over the term permits the students to go

through a number of tasks common to public relations writing and to put them together into a press kit. Finally, the public relations student has the opportunity to shine with his polished press kit...at least the match of the journalistic counterpart with his clutch of by-lined clippings.

The press kit for the actual client provides tangible evidence of both quality and variety of at least 14 pieces of writing...from fact sheets, releases for popular and trade press, hometowners, business letters and interview scripts for a television talk show, photos with cutlines for print and mattes for television, 10-, 30- and 60-second public service announcements for radio and television with bounce-back cards for feedback, a storyboard and production script with a statement of objectives and an audience analysis as well as samples of institutional and advocacy advertising in a variety of media from billboard to professional journals.

Through actual contact with the client the student also learns the need to check copy for accuracy and client acceptance. And by this time he or she has enough familiarity with the client organization to identify a touchy problem...one with a potential for conflict in a hostile public opinion climate.

The position paper is the last assignment written by each student. A press conference is set up in a television studio, and students are assigned roles as print and broadcast reporters who come armed with unsettling and pointed questions to foil the spokesperson. Others fill as coaches who give preparatory advice on how to survive a "60 Minutes" type experience. By this time at the end of the term, the students are comfortable enough with each other to play the game of flailing brickbats.

In fact, they enjoy the change of scene and look forward to the videotape playback following each conference. (It brings out the ham in all of us.) The videotape of each session is kept on the college library reserve and can be checked out just like a book for the next two to three weeks following the mock press conference. In this way the student can reflect on his or her own verbal and nonverbal behavior in a stressful situation and improve upon the performance as he or she prepares for a new professional role as a public relations practitioner...who thinks first...then speaks or writes.

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Excerpts of the videotaped press conference and examples of the press kit will be available at the end of the session.

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5. Detweiler, John S. "Public Relations Writing IS Different." Paper presented for Teaching Standards Committee, Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Boston, August 12, 1980.

6. Bissland, James H. "Peer Evaluation Method Promotes Stronger Writing." Journalism Educator 34 (4), January, 1980, p. 17.